

## **Guardians of our Resources**

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I was very encouraged to learn that tribal representatives at the recent Yukon River Inter-Tribal Fish Commission meeting supported a resolution calling for a moratorium on Yukon River king salmon fishing. A similar resolution was considered a week later by the delegates at the Kuskokwim River Inter-tribal Fish Commission held in Bethel. I believe that such pro-active leadership bodes well for our collective efforts to protect the Delta's life-giving runs of king salmon. As the seriousness of the situation sinks in, more and more people are coming up with constructive ideas for dealing with the king salmon crisis.

Naturally, not everyone agrees on exactly what the right course of action is. Although I've been gratified to hear from people who support the conservation actions being implemented by the Fish and Wildlife Service and Alaska Department of Fish and Game this season, we know that there are people who still disagree with our approach. In civil but blunt conversations, we have been told by some folks that they intend to fish for kings regardless of the legal restrictions now in place. Despite my appreciation for the passion and commitment expressed by those who intend to target kings, such actions simply are not fair to those subsistence users who are willing to sacrifice in order to restore the salmon populations.

For all concerned, I believe it is important for everyone to know what the Fish and Wildlife Service is planning in terms of law enforcement. As I've stated in public at the Yupiit Nation Tribal Forum, before the Kuskokwim River Salmon Management Working Group, and in recent village visits, we intend to have our Federal Wildlife Officers visiting the communities and patrolling the river so as to encourage compliance with the regulations. In fact, we've had officers on the Kuskokwim since the first restrictions went into place on May 20<sup>th</sup> and we'll have officers present throughout the king salmon run.

We realize that such enforcement is seen by some as essential, but by others as controversial. To help people on all sides to better understand what our law enforcement officers do and why they do it, I'd like to take this opportunity to explain the role of our Federal Wildlife Officers as they try to protect fish and wildlife for the enjoyment and use of everyone.

Across the globe and among diverse cultures, people's lives are often guided by custom and convention, rules and regulations, traditions and taboos. Ideally, such practices protect both individuals and societies. Most citizens obey most laws, but, human nature being what it is, some individuals do not. Over the centuries, therefore, societies have developed various ways to prevent offenders from taking advantage of law-abiding citizens.

In our society, we have a vast network of laws and regulations, stretching from the local to the national level. We have traffic laws to ensure public safety, tax laws to provide money for public services, and civil rights laws to help protect the delicate balance between individual liberty and social needs. Having a system of laws with a means to encourage compliance is one way of promoting the common good.

This certainly holds true in wildlife conservation. Healthy wildlife populations are an important public resource, and protecting those populations promotes the common good. There are many different ways to protect wildlife populations, but one of the most important is by managing human behavior. Whether it is traditional wisdom encouraging gatherers to take only a few eggs from a waterfowl nest, or using the latest technology to disrupt the illegal trade of rhino and tiger parts in Asia, the protection of wildlife resources often requires limiting what people do.

Such is the task of Federal Wildlife Officers in the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. They have been entrusted with enforcing the laws passed by our elected representatives and signed by our governors and presidents. These officers don't make up the laws, but they are duty-bound to uphold them. Through their efforts, they seek to contribute to the sound management of our nation's fish and wildlife. In many ways, they are truly guardians of our natural resources. These officers are involved in a wide range of activities on behalf of their fellow citizens. They do outreach in remote rural communities, investigate reports of illegal guiding on public lands, help protect rare and threatened species, encourage the use of non-toxic shot during the waterfowl hunting season, and conduct complex undercover investigations.

Here in Alaska, Federal wildlife officers protect fish, wildlife, and plants, as well as other natural, cultural, and historical resources by building understanding and encouraging the public to have a greater appreciation of refuge resources, laws, and regulations. These officers encourage voluntary compliance through education and outreach, as well as law enforcement actions. Nearly ten major laws and sets of regulations provide the legal authority for their activities on the public lands of our national wildlife refuges, including the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Endangered Species Act, the National Wildlife Refuge System Act, and Federal subsistence regulations.

On Alaskan refuges, officers have a special mandate because of ANILCA--the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. When ANILCA was passed in 1980, sixteen refuges were either created or expanded. One of the guiding purposes enshrined in ANILCA for fifteen of those refuges was to "provide the opportunity for continued subsistence use by local residents." Thus, officers always do their work with an eye to the future. At times, their efforts may limit *current* opportunities, in order to make sure that *future* generations have a continuing opportunity for subsistence as well. That is exactly what they are trying to do this season along the Kuskokwim—enforcing restrictions on the harvest of king salmon today so that our children and our children's children have kings tomorrow.

Of course, if our wildlife resources were unlimited, and if our resources were not also used by folks farther upriver or down the flyway, and if everyone always took only what they truly needed, there would be no need for laws and enforcement. Unfortunately, the natural resources of the world *are* limited, and human nature is the same wherever you go, whether you are on the Mississippi Delta or the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta. A small number of people choose not to abide by the law, whether it's shooting a cow moose during a closed season, or leaving nets untended on side sloughs, or using toxic lead shot. Similarly, some of our citizens don't take personal responsibility for learning and abiding by the legal requirements for harvesting wildlife. Here in Alaska, law enforcement officers do their best to make sure that these few don't reduce the subsistence opportunities for the law-abiding majority.

Law enforcement officers have a tough job, but a necessary one because not everyone uses the right ammunition, fishes with the proper nets, gets the required licenses, or limits their harvest to what can be legally caught. Officers appreciate the value and importance of subsistence, they encourage voluntary compliance with the law, and they don't enjoy having to write tickets and document violations, even though sometimes they must. In fact, they would much rather have friendly interactions with members of the public who are compliant with the law and legally harvesting foods to feed their families. When that doesn't happen, however, these officers do what is required of them for our benefit and for the benefit of those to come. Their hard work helps to guard everybody's wildlife resources, resources which we hope future generations will be able to continue to harvest and enjoy.